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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some aspects of polyphonic theory, which contests the idea of the unique speaking subject and claims that several voices can be manifest in one utterance. The theory is related to the analysis of a coherent text consisting of several utterances. The notions of enunciator, speaker, enunciation, and utterance are defined in polyphonic terms. A polyphonic analysis of argumentative text tests the hypothesis that if there is one voice that is stronger than the others this voice can be characterized as the most important one and situated at the top of the information hierarchy. Results show the analysis to be legitimate in the study of structuring and hierarchical organization of information. (Author/JP)

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Polyphonic structure

KJERSTI FLØTTUM

Abstract

This paper presents some aspects of the polyphonic theory, which contests the idea of the unique speaking subject and claims that several voices can be manifest in one utterance. The theory is related to the analysis of a coherent text consisting of several utterances.

The aim is to find out to what extent this theory can contribute to the issue of hierarchisation. If there is one voice that is stronger than the others, this voice or point of view can be characterized as the most important one, and situated at the top of the information hierarchy.

The notions of enunciator, speaker, enunciation and utterance are defined in polyphonic terms, and the relations between the speaker and the enunciator(s) will be particularly studied in order to develop a basis for the polyphonic interpretation of text.

1. Introduction

The theme of this symposium, discourse structuring - reception and production strategies, has been one of the main preoccupations of my research for some years. When studying the summarizing of texts, I have naturally had to deal with reception as well as production strategies. The text producer uses certain strategies which the receiver or interpreter must understand in order to summarize the text. The result of this process, the summary, is then one possible realization of reception strategies. (See Fløttum, 1988.)

In this paper I shall not be concerned with summarizing *per se*; but the aim of the discussion I undertake is to contribute towards a coherent theory of text summarizing.

I shall look into the theory of polyphony in the way it has been established linguistically by Oswald Ducrot (see Ducrot et al. 1980, Anscombre & Ducrot, 1983 and especially Ducrot, 1984) and elaborated on by Henning Nølke (see Nølke, 1989). A presentation of some aspects of the theory will serve as a starting point for an attempt to analyse the polyphonic structure of a text. In the discussion I shall relate the results of the analysis to the issue of summarizing.

This presentation clearly represents a report on work in progress. It is the very first attempt at a polyphonic analysis that I have undertaken, and it obviously has to be further developed.

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2. The theory of polyphony

The notion of polyphony was introduced by the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin. He wanted to designate a new way of looking upon literature (a new perception of literature).

Bakhtin primarily uses the notion in the analysis of novels written by Dostoyevsky (Bakhtin, 1970 and 1978, written in the 1930s). His main point is that in the texts he discusses there is no unique and objective world which has emerged only through the consciousness of the author. In reality there is a multitude of minds, or rather a multitude of **voices** that are woven together in the text. According to Bakhtin, everything we say is linked to something that has been said earlier. What we express is often a reaction to what others have expressed, a reaction where we add something ourselves. (Only Adam could, for a while, escape from this dialogical orientation of speech. He could start from zero!)

Several questions arise as to a possible application of this theory within the field of discourse structuring. In my opinion, one of the most important questions in this context is the following: How are the voices **manifested** in the discourse or in the text? This question leads us to the linguistic development of the polyphonic theory by Ducrot (to some extent in cooperation with J.C. Anscombre).

Ducrot (especially Ducrot, 1984: 171ff) has developed Bakhtin's notion of polyphony in a way that makes it very useful in linguistic contexts. While Bakhtin understands polyphony as a phenomenon that exists whenever several voices are present, Ducrot claims there is polyphony only when the speaker does not identify with all the voices that are brought on the stage of discourse.

For Ducrot the notion of polyphony is particularly important to give us an escape from an idea that has dominated modern linguisics, in structuralism as well as in generative transformational theory, for a very long time. It concerns the notion of the **uniqueness** of the speaking subject. With a polyphonic conception of meaning, Ducrot wants to demonstrate how utterances can signal the presence of several voices, and not only the voice of the speaking subject.

One of the questions Ducrot poses is: Do characteristics normally given to the speaking subject have to be connected with one and the same person? In other words, is the speaking subject the only one that can be responsible for the production of the utterance and the realization of the illocutionary act, for example, and is he always the one referred to by the pronoun *I* (identity between I and the speaker)? For simple utterances this may seem acceptable. But according to Ducrot, in other and more complex contexts, the polyphonic interpretation is favoured or even imposed. (See Ducrot et al. 1980: 46ff, with examples of polyphonic expressions such as "à ce que dit X", "il paraît que" and the tense "le conditionnel".) When it comes to utterances in

a complex context, it may be difficult to maintain the thesis of the unique speaking subject. Here we can often distinguish between several subjects or voices. The thesis defended by Ducrot posits that one has to distinguish between at least two types of characters. According to him, this is indispensable in order to get the complete meaning of the utterance (cf. "le sens de l'énoncé", Ducrot, 1984: 193). These characters are **the speakers** ("les locuteurs") and **the enunciators** ("les énonciateurs"), (see definitions below).

Let us look at one of Ducrot's examples, from the play *Britannicus* by Racine (Act 1, Scene 1). Agrippina speaks ironically of what her confidante Albine thinks about Nero (Albine admires the independent behaviour of Nero):

> Et ce même Néron, *que la vertu conduit*,
> Fait enlever Junie au milieu de la nuit.
> (Ducrot 1984:204, my emphasis)
>
> (And the same Nero, *who is guided by virtue*,
> has Junie taken away in the middle of the night.)

This is an example where the speaker is clearly communicating another voice in addition to her own. The utterance, especially the relative clause, is meant to express Albine's point of view (presented as ridiculous) and not Agrippina's. It is also clear that all the first person marks in the rest of the monologue refer to Agrippina. Thus, there are two voices or **enunciators** manifested: One which can be associated with the speaker (which is responsible for the words of the utterance) and one which is only expressed through the speaker. So the speaker is not unique!

Although there are no explicit words or marks of the different voices, we know by the context that polyphony is present.

To undertake polyphonic analysis, we need a presentation of some of the theoretical notions of Ducrot. This part is very much inspired by Nølke's well-written introduction to, and development of, Ducrot's theory. (Nølke has also written numerous articles on subjects related to the theory of polyphony.)

Both Ducrot and Nølke make clear distinctions between the enunciation, the utterance and the sentence:

enunciation: an historical event, in which the utterance appears,
utterance: the result of the enunciation (observable),
sentence: an abstract unit underlying the utterance. (Nølke 1989:15)

I shall not pay much attention to these different levels. I use them only to clarify the distinction between speaker and enunciator. Let us look at the definition of these categories:

Speaker: the one who, at the utterance level, is responsible for the enunciation (typical linguistic mark: the first person pronoun).
Enunciators: the ones who are responsible for the points of view communicated by the enunciation, expressed in the utterance. (The enunciators express themselves in the enunciation, but not always by means of precise words.)

Nølke also distinguishes between different **discourse individuals** ("diskursindividerne", see Nølke 1989:15-16). These are the individuals that can be made responsible for the expressed points of view in the discourse, or, in other words, they are linked to the enunciators. The discourse individuals are the speaker, the receiver and others that can be introduced into the discourse (individuals as well as groups of individuals). For practical reasons, **the speaker** will be the only discourse individual studied in the analysis which I shall undertake further down.

If, like Ducrot and Nølke, we look upon each utterance as a play in the theatre, we can say that the speaker presents a lot of actors (enunciators) who express different points of view in relation to the subject treated. (See Nølke 1989:16.) In other words, the speaker presents a number of different voices. Thus, it is vital to the interpretation of the utterance that one can determine the relations between the different actors (enunciators) and the discourse individuals (DI). The three types of relations mentioned by Nølke are (Nølke, 1989: 16):

- **adherence**: the DI (discourse individual) **adheres to** or **identifies with** a point of view (expressed by an enunciator);
- **acceptance**: the DI **accepts** a point of view provisionally, even if he/she does not assert it on his own account;
- **dissociation**: the DI **dissociates** himself/herself from a point of view.

The polyphony phenomenon is important in its own way: it contributes to explaining the troublesome notion of meaning. But in this particular context I want to relate polyphony to the problems of summarizing. Since summarizing is to a large extent a matter of hierarchical organization of information, one of the most important questions must be: Which of the voices presented is the most important and how is it explicitly marked? I shall look into this in the following part.

3. Polyphonic analysis of a text

Ducrot's main contribution is the study of the polyphony of isolated utterances. However, Nølke tries to apply the theory to a brief passage of text. He claims that the polyphony is a factor of coherence (the interpreter expects a certain degree of coherence among all the voices; see Nølke, 1989: 52).

One of the reasons for my interest in the notion of polyphony is the opportunity it offers for a hierarchical organization of information in texts. This leads us straight back to the issue of summarizing. A certain hierarchical organization of information is absolutely necessary in order to summarize a text. There are many kinds of analysis which can be of great help in this context. It suffices to mention analyses of macrostructure, superstructure, isotopies, etc. (see Fløttum, 1988, Fløttum, 1989 and van Dijk, 1980). With a polyphonic analysis, however, we enter a new dimension of text structure. It seems reasonable to assume that the different voices manifested in a text must be uncovered, if we are to get hold of the complete meaning. And if a possible polyphonic structure can say anything about the hierarchy of text information, we have learned a great deal about the problems of summarizing texts.

I shall propose the following hypothesis: The voice (or point of view) which the S (speaker) **adheres to** is the strongest (or the most important) one, and therefore the one to be retained in the summary. The one the S **dissociates** himself/herself **from** is the weakest (or the least important) one, and the one to be left out in the summary. The relation of **acceptance** occupies a mid-position (when the S accepts a point of view without taking any responsibility for it).

After having analyzed the text, I shall compare the analysis with a model summary of the same text. This will be a kind of verification of the analysis.

The text that will be analysed here, ***La famille en danger*** ("The family in danger", see Appendix at the end of this paper), is an argumentative one. According to Nølke, the typical argumentative text is highly polyphonic, while the descriptive text, for example, is less so (Nølke, 1989: 52). The text ***La famille en danger*** deals with the institution of the family and the discussion about it. Although contested, the conclusion of the text is that, as an institution, the family has survived better than many others.

In the analysis, I shall only comment on a few passages with explicit polyphonic elements. For practical reasons, the text has been divided into numbered sequences. The enunciators are progressively numbered (e1, e2 ... en), although there is some coherence between them. The coherence that I shall look into here is the one that is possibly found between an enunciator and the speaker (S). My polyphonic analysis can be presented as follows:

I. Polyphonic element: negation

5) La contestation (6) *ne* date *pas* d'aujourd'hui.
6) dont la famille est l'objet

e1 - La contestation ... date d'aujourd'hui.
e2 - What e1 says is wrong.

S dissociates himself from e1 and adheres to e2. The dissociation is marked by the negation.

This way of analysing the syntactical negation represents the most classical one in polyphonic context.

II. Polyphonic element: the verb *paraître*

7) La nouveauté *paraît* surtout résider dans le fait
8) qu'on en parle plus librement que jadis
9) et que l'irruption de la vie sociale dans la vie familiale - notamment par le canal des mass média - a rendu les conflits plus aigus.

e3 - La nouveauté réside surtout dans le fait ... conflits plus aigus.
e4 - What e3 says can be true.

S dissociates himself from e3, and accepts e4 (without taking any responsibility for it). The dissociation is marked by the verb form *paraît*.

I must admit some hesitation as to the analysis of the verb *paraître* in this context. I am not convinced that the relation between the S and e3 is one of dissociation (maybe it is more of an acceptance). But since I have no other analysis to put forward, I will stick to this one, which resembles the one Nølke presents of the expression *il paraît que* (Nølke, 1989: 21-22).

In the next passage analysed we shall see another example of this verb.

III. Polyphonic element: the verb *paraître*

10) Sans cesse annoncée pour demain,
11) la fin de la famille *paraît* encore, aujourd'hui, fort **hypothétique**.

e5 - La fin de la famille est ... fort hypothétique.
e6 - What e5 says can be true.

S dissociates himself from e5 and accepts e6. The dissociation is marked by the verb form *paraît*.

From a polyphonic point of view, this is a more complex utterance than the previous one. But for the reason expressed above, I shall not go deeper into the analysis here.

IV. Polyphonic elements: the connectors *certes* and *mais*

12) Les mentalités évoluent, *certes*,
13) *mais* moins vite qu'on ne le dit parfois.

e7 - Les mentalités évoluent.
e8 - Les mentalités évoluent aussi vite qu'on le dit parfois.
e9 - Les mentalités évoluent moins vite qu'on ne le dit parfois.

S accepts e7 (marked by *certes*), dissociates himself from e8 and adheres to e9 (marked by *mais*).

The polyphonic structure that *mais* introduces is specified by *certes*, i.e. *certes* restricts the concessive structure as to the possibilities of what can be put into it. In this example it shows that the speaker has an open mind. He presents another point of view than the one he adheres to (but without taking any responsibility for it).

V. Polyphonic element: the connector *même si*

17) ...la famille reste la cellule de base de la société,
18) *même si* certaines de ses fonctions ont changé.

e10 - La famille reste la cellule de base de la société.
e11 - Certaines de ses fonctions ont changé.

S adheres to e10 and accepts e11. The restriction put on e11 in this concessive structure is marked by the connector *même si*.

The kind of concessive structure presented here could of course be more deeply analysed (for example the conclusions to which the utterances lead; see Nølke, 1989: 55-56), but this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

VI. Polyphonic element: the connector *en effet*

19) Que la famille ait changé,
20) *en effet*, nul ne le conteste.

e12 - La famille a changé.
e13 - La famille n'a pas changé.

S adheres to e12 and dissociates himself (together with "all the others") from e13. These relations are marked by the connector *en effet* (and the expression *nul ne le conteste*).

However, this is a very superficial analysis; the connector *en effet* must be studied more profoundly.

VII. Polyphonic elements: the verb mode "conditionnel passé" and the connector *même si*

38) L'Armée, l'Eglise, l'Ecole ont chacune connu leur crise,
39) il *aurait été* surprenant
40) que la famille n'en supporte pas certaines conséquences.
41) *même si*, comme **institution**, elle résiste mieux que les autres.

e14 - La famille supporte certaines conséquences des crises connues dans les différentes institutions.
e15 - La famille résiste mieux que les autres institutions.

S accepts both e14 and e15. The restriction put on e15 (only acceptance and not adherence) is marked by the connector *même si*, and the acceptance of e14 by the mode "conditionnel passé" (*aurait été*). When using the mode of the "conditionnel", the S expresses that he can accept the point of view which is stated, but without taking any responsibility for it.

In fact, there are two polyphonic constructions in this passage. It would have been very interesting to try to put them in a hierarchy. In this context, however, I only want to point at the possibility of putting e14 higher up than e15 (cf.passage V, also with the connector *même si*), without justifying it any further.

4. Results and discussion

This analysis points out a lot of problems that need further study, and several questions that have to be answered must be put on ice. The following four points represent some of them:

1) The general problem of the determination and the interpretation of polyphonic elements. (For example: In what way is the verb *paraître* polyphonic, and how should it be represented in the linguistic analysis?)
2) The relation between the enunciators and the discourse individuals. In the present analysis I have only taken the speaker into consideration.
3) The coherence between the different enunciators (or the points of view or voices that they express).
4) The passages of a text where there is no apparent polyphonic element. In what way can these be incorporated in the analysis?

Despite the large number of unanswered questions, I want to underline that the preliminary analysis reported on here has produced interesting results. I have made a

classification of the enunciators observed, according to the various relations that were posed between speaker and enunciators:

Figure 1. *The relations between the speaker and the various enunciators (or points of view):*

	Adherence	Acceptance	Dissociation
I	e2		e1
II		e4	e3
III		e6	e5
IV	e9	e7	e8
V	e10	e11	
VI	e12		e13
VII		e14,e15	

Let us now compare this classification with the model summary (see *Corrigé* in the Appendix). According to the hypothesis posed above, we should find in the summary the points of view expressed by the enunciators to whom the speaker of the text adheres. These points of view are e2, e9, e10 and e12. All of these are in fact represented in the summary (in sequences 1, 4 and 5 respectively).

Other voices that are present in the summary are e6, e14 and e15. These are voices that the speaker accepts, even if he does not adhere openly by taking responsibility for them.

Finally, the voices from which the speaker dissociates himself (e1, e3, e5, e8 and e13) are not expressed in the summary.

So, the conclusion must be that although this rough analysis obviously needs refinement, especially in formal representation, it has shown its legitimacy in the study of structuring and hierarchical organization of information. Finally I also want to suggest that further polyphonic analyses of texts might reveal relations between polyphonic structure and text types (see Nølke, 1989: 61).

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Appendix

Bruno Frappat: *La famille en danger* (*Le Monde*)

1) La famille en danger, la famille en question, il faut restaurer le rôle de la famille,
2) il faut faire élater la cellule familiale...
3) Telles sont quelques unes des réflexions
4) souvent entendues aujourd'hui sur un sujet universel, aussi ancien que l'homme et que la femme.
>>>
5) La contestation (6) ne date pas d'aujourd'hui.
6) dont la famille est l'objet
7) La nouveauté paraît surtout résider dans le fait
8) qu'on en parle plus librement que jadis
9) et que l'irruption de la vie sociale dans la vie familiale - notamment par le canal des mass média - a rendu les conflits plus aigus.
>>>
10) Sans cesse annoncée pour demain,
11) la fin de la famille paraît encore, aujourd'hui, fort **hypothétique**.
12) Les mentalités évoluent, certes,
13) mais moins vite qu'on ne le dit parfois.
14) Il apparaît d'autre part un décalage entre ies mentalité sou les opinions - (15) - et la réalité des conduites individuelles.
15) affichées par exemple á l'occasion d'un sondage
16) La pression sociale, d'une part, les nécessités affectives, d'autres part, expliquent en grande partie
17) que la famille reste la cellule de base de la société,
18) même si certaines de ses fonctions ont changé.
>>>
19) Que la famille ait changé,
20) en effet, nul ne le conteste.
21) La famille élargie de jadis, (22), s'est restreinte.
22) oú les fonctions de subsistance économique étaient essentielles dans un monde rural
23) C'est ce rétrécissement qui est aujourd'hui le pluscontesté.
24) Destinée á être davantage un milieu de vie
25) oú s'établissent de multiples relations interpersonnelles,
26) la famille doit éviter
27) d'être seulement un lieu de consommation.
28) Tout, pourtant, la pousse
29) á être la cellule de base d'une société de consommation.
30) Et c'est précisement ce que refusent ces jeunes - encore minoritaires et peu nombreux -
31) qui ont crée, ici ou lá, des communautés.
>>>
32) Les discussions sur l'utilité, ou la nocivité, de la famille atteignent des fois un grand degré de passion.
33) C'est qu'elles se situent sur un fond de décor
34) où interviennent la sexualité, l'affectivité, l'éducationdes enfants et toute la morale.
>>>
35) **Magnifiée** par les religions,
36) soutenue - en principe - par les pouvoirs publics,
37) la famille recoit comme autant d'éclaboussures lescontestations des différentes institutions.
38) L'Armée, l'Eglise, l'Ecole ont chacune connu leur crise,
39) il aurait été surprenant
40) que la famille n'en supporte pas certaines conséquences.

41) Même si, comme **institution**, elle résiste mieux que les autres.

Corrigé (model summary):
1) La famille fut toujours l'objet d'éternels débats **(e2)**
2) dans lesquels la contestation actuelle prend naturellement sa place,
3) sans qu'il ne soit véritablement porté atteinte á l'institution familiale. **(e6)**
>>>
4) En effet, pour des raisons de conformisme et d'affectivité la famille reste la pierre angulaire de notre société; **(e9, e10)**
5) cependant, son rôle économique s'est indéniablement transformé en une fonction de conviviabilité **(e12)**
6) qu'elle n'assure pas toujours,
7) d'oú sa remise en cause par certains Jeunes.
>>>
8) Ainsi, bien que placée au centre de controverses passionnées,
9) la famille demeure une institution stable. **(e14, e15)**